

Maidstone Borough Council

External Overview and Scrutiny Committee

Tuesday 21 April 2009

Leader of the Council: Progress During 2008/09

Report of: Senior Overview and Scrutiny Officer

1. Introduction

- 1.1 The External Overview and Scrutiny Committee is responsible for holding to account those Cabinet Members whose portfolios fall within the remit of the Committee.
- 1.2 The key Cabinet Members whose portfolios relate to the Committee are the Leader of the Council and the Cabinet Member for Community Services.

2. Leader of the Council

- 2.1 The areas of the Leader's portfolio that are relevant to the Committee are as follows:

- **Sustainable Community Strategy** – to take responsibility for the Sustainable Community Strategy and to work with the LSP in delivering its objectives.
- **External Affairs** – to act as an ambassador for the Council and its activities amongst external advisory and interest groups; To act as an advocate for the Council in pressing for changes in national policy.

- 2.2 At the meeting of the External Overview and Scrutiny Committee on 17 June 2008, Members interviewed the Leader of the Council with regard to his priorities for the Municipal Year 2008/09.

- 2.3 Members also considered a written statement by the Leader, which is attached at Appendix A to this report.

- 2.4 The relevant extract from the minutes of the 17 June 2008 meeting is below:

"The Leader of the Council, Councillor Chris Garland, outlined his plans and priorities for the year with regard to the two issues relevant to the Committee.

External Affairs

The Council had been looking at joint working for some time with Swale, Tunbridge Wells and Ashford Borough Councils. Major issues for the Council, such as economic prosperity, skills and financial issues could not

be adequately addressed by the Council on its own. Joint working needed to deliver service benefits as well as savings; if joint working was to the detriment of a service, it was not appropriate, no matter what the financial benefit. Joint working with other local authorities could save those authorities around £1 million over 3 years.

Kent County Council (KCC) had published a response to the sub-national review of economic development and regeneration outlining a "Kent Regeneration Board". The sub-national review proposed the dissolution of the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) and the South East England Regional Assembly (SEERA), and the Kent Regeneration Board was a proposal for a Board to agree an overarching strategic vision for Kent in the absence of those agencies. The Chairman asked that the Committee be kept informed of developments with this.

Councillor Garland also highlighted the importance of engaging with KCC to ensure that the Borough Council's voice was heard.

Sustainable Community Strategy and Local Strategic Partnership

The Local Strategic Partnership (LSP) was a major function for addressing community issues in Maidstone. It had been criticised in the past for being a 'talking shop' without direction or outcomes but would now be thematically focused to address issues including economic regeneration, skills, education, health and sustainable communities.

The Local Development Framework (LDF) was a key document to outline the direction that the Borough was travelling in and would therefore inform the Sustainable Community Strategy. The LDF had been delayed by the Kent International Gateway planning application, however this would be dealt with by the beginning of the autumn and the LDF and Core Strategy could then be re-addressed.

A Councillor referred to partnership working and asked why the Council was not working more closely with Tonbridge and Malling Borough Council. Councillor Garland stated that he had received proposals to build some of the Borough's target of 10,080 new homes in the Hermitage Lane area, crossing over into Tonbridge and Malling. However, this would not go ahead as there was a concern that Tonbridge and Malling would claim some of those houses to help to meet its own housing targets. It was agreed that it would be useful to consult with Tonbridge and Malling on the LDF. The Chairman stated that Tonbridge and Malling had been approached on numerous occasions to work more closely with the Council but had been unwilling. The Chairman also highlighted that he believed partnerships should not be to the detriment of Council staff, for example while the Overview and Scrutiny partnership had made good achievements, there had also been resource implications which the scrutiny team had been asked to investigate.

In response to a question, Councillor Garland provided an update on the Mid-Kent Improvement Partnership. He had met with representatives from Ashford, Swale and Tunbridge Wells Borough Councils and the

proposal was to set aside £150,000 for joint projects. For example, where Maidstone delivered a better service, it would lead a project to share knowledge. Quorum would apply, however, and this was 3 of the 4 councils. If only 2 wished to join a joint project, they could do so but would not have access to the £150,000 to facilitate it. Governance arrangements for the Partnership would be circulated to Members shortly. Councillor Garland emphasised that he could only support sharing senior management if a business case could be made.

A Councillor requested an update on the new Local Area Agreement. Councillor Garland explained that 32 targets based on the new set of National Indicators had been agreed by all 12 districts and KCC. However, Maidstone had a record of delivering on targets and he was concerned that if other districts did not also deliver, this could affect the performance of the Kent Partnership as a whole and impact on funding for the Council. It was not yet clear what this impact would be.

A Councillor referred to the University College for the Creative Arts (UCCA) looking to relocate and asked what the Leader was doing to encourage the college to stay in Maidstone. Councillor Garland explained that four sites in Maidstone had been identified as possible sites for the University College, and the Cabinet Member for Regeneration, along with senior officers, had met with UCCA to emphasise the benefits of Maidstone as a location, for example Maidstone Studios, Media Tree and the town's nightlife. There was also huge cross-party political will for UCCA to stay in the town. Councillor Garland confirmed that the proposed sites were big enough to allow for expansion of the University College. A Councillor asked how Maidstone could train or attract a higher skilled workforce without a university. Councillor Garland stated that the Council needed to lobby KCC because Maidstone was one of the worst performers in Kent in relation to statutory education. The Council also needed to engage its partners to deliver training. 'Skills' was high on the agenda for both KCC and the Council and there was now a political will in Maidstone to address this.

With regard to councillor involvement with children's services on the LSP, the Leader agreed that this should be the case, however he was unsure of the arrangements.

A Councillor stated that all Members should see the minutes of LSP policy group meetings. The Leader agreed, highlighting that it was important for Members to fully understand the LSP now that funding would be directed through it.

Councillor Garland concluded by informing Members that he had attended a meeting with Chief Superintendent Alasdair Hope with regard to a proposal to have a joint partnership board for crime reduction with Swale. This would involve the Leaders of the Councils and the appropriate Cabinet Members. This arrangement would allow the police to attract more funding and would also be a good idea strategically as some of Swale's crime issues were similar to Maidstone's."

3. Recommendation

- 3.1 Members are recommended to consider the statement made by the Leader at the beginning of the year and ask questions with regard to progress that has been made on those issues highlighted as priorities.

LEADER'S PRIORITIES & PLANS 2008/09

1. Introduction - Strategic Approach and Themes

I take as the starting point for my cabinet's approach to the next year the 6 themes that the council has already adopted in its strategic plan namely:

- A healthy environment
- Sustainable Communities
- Prosperity
- Lifelong learning
- Quality Living
- Quality Decent Homes that People can afford

These are themes that the previous Conservative administration under Eric Hotson pursued and ones that the current Conservative administration will continue.

These themes cannot be achieved in isolation from one another and must be pulled together. We cannot have prosperity without the requisite skills set in our communities, and we cannot have sustainable communities without prosperity. Equally, we cannot have quality living without prosperity and a healthy environment. All these areas are required to be delivered and acted upon in order to achieve a vibrant, prosperous, dynamic and quality driven town and borough.

In addition, we cannot achieve this alone and we must work with effective partners, be they specific groupings dealing with specific tasks (such as Locate in Kent) or neighbouring local authorities and our own County Council. To this end, we must build effective partnership working and not partnership working for its own 'tick box' sake. The vehicle for this is the Local Strategic Partnership (LSP).

However, in order to begin one must have a starting point and that starting point must be economic prosperity – quality jobs and economic skills sets are the lynchpin, which will help deliver the rest of the themes and priorities.

Statistics demonstrate all too clearly that failure to engender the right environment for prosperity - whether it be for individuals or businesses or indeed towns - leads to lack of health, poor quality living, poor environment, poor housing and rising crime.

The council has accepted, cross party, the need for growth point status – now we must balance this acceptance of housing numbers with business generation and up skilling of the indigenous workforce.

2. Achieving Economic Prosperity

Maidstone has a distinct comparative advantage to most other towns in Kent with our retail offering and this must be maintained. However, in order to achieve *prosperity*

and reduce outward flows of commuters to London and elsewhere we must become a beacon of opportunity to other tertiary businesses that can provide a higher Gross Value Added(GVA) to the borough.

This will be achieved by the following:

- Encouraging Iconic economic projects into the borough, such as the Kent Clinic and associated ancillary services.
- Continuing to welcome into the borough outside businesses that will add value and raise average wages in the borough, such as Eclipse Park.
- Using the LSP and County Council to investigate and action plans for the skilling of the workforce and improvement to the statutory provision of education in the borough.
- Engendering an environment where indigenous small businesses can grow and foster a long term ability to survive and remain resilient in a challenging economic environment through support of small business 'incubator' units.
- Working closely with Kent Invicta Chambers of Commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses to deepen encourage better links between businesses in the borough.
- Enhance the importance and activity of Maidstone's Economic Forum and to widen its membership to ensure greater participation from the wider business community and use this as a vehicle to deliver a Core Strategy that will balance up the housing numbers accepted by the council
- Develop the economic aspects of the Core Strategy, in conjunction with partners and business forums and wider consultations, in a sensitive and pragmatic manner for economic development.
- Ensure that the emerging Core Strategy accepts and lays down policies for the correct balancing of housing numbers and business growth.
- An acceptance that the borough council and its partners cannot 'buck the market' but can create an environment where the market will wish to operate.

Whilst I am clear that economic prosperity is the engine room for the delivery of the council's other priorities we must protect the nature and environment of our town and borough. ***Economic Prosperity strategies that do not protect and secure the rural and environmental charm and character of the borough will lead to the reverse of what we are trying to achieve.***

Emphasis, through the Core Strategy, the planning system and widening of Area Character Assessments, will be given to ensuring we maintain our historic reputation that comes with our market town, our status as the County Town, and the beauty of the surrounding countryside. Equally though we need an economy where people can continue to live and enjoy what Maidstone as a borough has to offer.

3. Transport

Transportation has an affect on how the borough will flourish and remain attractive for living in and accessing.

We have direct influence only over one tool for tackling congestion and that is Park & Ride. All other aspects of transport and road provision are with Kent County Council and the Highways Agency.

Park & Ride is still heavily subsidised by the council and for the long term survival of the scheme this cannot be allowed to continue. However, I am clear that Park & Ride is and will be a central feature for tackling congestion in the town and borough.

We will therefore:

Begin a 'Master Planning' exercise for the development of a strategic approach to the long term provision of Park & Ride; developing a programmed implementation of sites, on a business case approach, to cater for projected growth in population, housing and car usage over the life-cycle of Growth Point status. This will bring to an end the ad-hoc approach that historically has been taken to Park & Ride. It will also assist in reducing and ultimately eliminating the heavy subsidisation of the past. This will ensure its long-term survival and viability.

4. External Affairs & Joint Working

In the preamble to this document, I mentioned that it was not possible for the council to work in isolation and will need to embrace and work with other key effective partners. The principal forum for this will be the Local Strategic partnership and work has already started in turning this into a more robust thematically focused group and I will continue to build upon this as its importance increases over time as it becomes the likely vehicle for government funding. The LSP is central in assisting the borough council on working towards the six themes it has outlined. We cannot, by ourselves, achieve our aims and objectives.

We are currently seeking agreement to joint working practices with Swale, Tunbridge Wells and Ashford Boroughs but the overriding priority for me is to agree only where clear benefits can be accrued by Maidstone Borough without detriment to current provision of services - then there is merit in joint working.

5. Provision of Council Core Services and Finance

I am clear that despite the governments emphasis on council's being 'Place Shapers' the public expect the provision of certain core services at a level that they deem acceptable and appropriate.

The new waste collection regime will continue to be rolled out and I am adamant that the maintenance of weekly collection of residual waste and the fortnightly collection of recyclables currently remains the most appropriate system when balancing the need for increased recycling rates with reputational integrity of the council.

Cost savings can be made once the roll out has been completed and I am certain that the additional financial burden resulting from this new system as opposed to the so-called 'Alternate weekly Collection' method needs to be mitigated where possible. This includes considering the possibility of Saturday collections and, perhaps, joint working initiatives. Savings need to be made and will be made where appropriate.

The Conservative administration, in the face of real cuts in grants from central government, is well aware of the need to maintain council tax rates at a comparatively low level. I am clear that the council, as before, must pursue a policy of value for money in everything we do, balancing this with the need to provide core services at a level deemed acceptable by the public. Savings to the detriment of core services is not acceptable and savings must be sought through better working practice and joint working where it can be proved there are real service and financial benefits from doing so.

Conclusion

The worst evil that can confront any authority is to preside over a declining town and borough, with increasing housing numbers and population, for therein lays an ever-declining circle of an inability to deliver on the other priorities that the council has set itself along with the human misery that results from declining economic prosperity.

Therefore, the 'golden thread' of this administration is to deliver, with our partners and through the Local Strategic Partnership, an agenda of quality economic development, a proper transport strategy through Park & Ride and provision of quality jobs and skills. Only this can ensure that the themes of affordable housing, quality living and a healthy environment, together with tackling deprivation, can be delivered.